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AUTHOR Starr, Al
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ABSTRACT

The Creative Writing Forum of Essex Community College is a cooperative venture sponsored by three community colleges and the public school system in Baltimore County, Maryland, in which presentations and workshops are given by a featured creative writer and a scholarship to a community college is awarded. The forum was designed to remind high school and college English teachers that they are doing different parts of the same job, to encourage students to write creatively, and to encourage students to continue their studies at Essex Community College. The original plan for the forum underwent considerable change as alternative sources of funding were sought after the first forum was held. Reactions to the first two forums have been very favorable, and the program is now refined to the point where only minor alterations will be needed. With some revision, this kind of program can work at other institutions as well. (RS)

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THE CREATIVE WRITING FORUM - -

Al Starr

High Schools and Community Colleges Working Together

In Essex Community College's Writing Center, I recently worked with a student who described herself as a "reviseaholic." Perhaps after you hear this presentation about the Creative Writing Forum, you will decide that her condition was contagious. During this talk, I will illustrate how the Forum was a product of fate, borrowed ideas, bad luck that turned out to be good, and, most of all, collaboration and revision.

Before I provide the history of the Creative Writing Forum, I will give you a general idea of what I'm talking about. The Creative Writing Forum is a cooperative venture that is sponsored by three community colleges and the public school system in Baltimore County, Maryland. It involves presentations and workshops that are given by a featured creative writer and various local creative writers. The project, also, includes a contest (with a scholarship as a prize) and various opportunities for students, faculty, and members of the community to interact with each other and the featured writer. It is a unique event, and it is also one that you may wish to adapt to your own needs, after you hear how we changed it ourselves.

It's amazing how fate can control the directions we take in our professional lives. One day during the fall of 1984, I stopped by the office of my department head to ask her about some very "important" matter that I cannot even recall at this point. What I can recall is the end of our conversation when she offered

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me a ticket to a special lecture on Flannery O'Connor at the College of Notre Dame in Baltimore, Maryland. The lecturer was to be Sally Fitzgerald, and her talk was to be followed by a dinner.

Now here is where fate began to take hold of me. To start with, I was not the first person to whom my department head had offered the ticket. Second, because the program took place during the late afternoon and early evening of a weekday, I considered turning down the invitation. But I had just taught Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" to my English 101 class, so her fiction was on my mind. And also, to be truthful, I was surprised that my department head had offered me the ticket. So I accepted.

On December 4, 1984, I arrived at the College of Notre Dame to hear Sally Fitzgerald's lecture on Flannery O'Connor. During the introductory portion of the program, I found out that her talk was part of a week long event and that the audience for this specific presentation was made up of area high school and college English teachers. Although I was fascinated by Fitzgerald's talk, what amazed me even more was the way I felt during the question and answer period that followed it. Without my realizing what was happening at the time, the audience was transformed for me from a group of high school English teachers and a group of college English teachers to a group of teachers who shared a common interest in Flannery O'Connor. But all I knew at that moment was that I was glad that I was there.

During the dinner that followed the presentation, I sat with

Charles Allen, whom I had noticed in the audience about halfway through Sally Fitzgerald's talk. Charlie, who was then supervisor of English for Baltimore City Schools, had hired me for my first teaching position after graduate school. I was glad to see him, and we spent much of dinner catching up on old times and then talking about what a great idea this event was. At the end of dinner, as we were walking out to our cars, he told me about another event that had equally impressed him. A few years earlier, Johns Hopkins University had sponsored a series of talks to get Baltimore City school students interested in creative writing. At each session, a well known creative writer would talk to an audience of high school students about why he or she loved to write. Charlie said that although he was apprehensive at first about how students would take these talks, he was amazed by the positive results. He added that he really regretted that the series had not been repeated because of budgetary constraints.

In the weeks that followed, I often thought about that evening and what I wanted to borrow from it for a project of my own. I wanted to come up with an idea that would remind high school and college English teachers that they were doing different parts of the same job, and one that would encourage students to write creatively. At the same time, I wanted to excite students about creative writing and to interest these students in continuing their studies at Essex Community College.

My obvious problem involved trying to come up with a project that would allow me to achieve all of these results. When I

eventually formulated my ideas about this project, I borrowed parts of an approach that I knew had been a success.

For years, the Speech and Drama Department at Essex had been sponsoring one leg of the Triple Crown--High School Speech Tournament, which was begun by a professor at the college. On three designated Saturdays, high school students from throughout the state of Maryland gather at first Essex, then Catonsville, and finally Harford Community Colleges. Then for a full day students compete in such events as poetry interpretation, debate, and duet acting. I know a great deal about this event because for years I have volunteered to be a judge. And although I was reluctant to be judge at first, I have returned almost every year because of the positive experiences I have had. The quality of the performances, the interaction among the students and among the students and their teachers, and the opportunity for my college to show itself off in the best possible light are what keep bringing me back. And these are the reasons that my original conception of the Creative Writing Forum borrowed freely from the speech tournament.

Soon afterwards, after meeting with my division chairman and a supervisor from the English Office for the Baltimore County Public Schools, I submitted a written proposal for a project that borrowed freely from each of the events that I have described. Little did I know at the time how much my grand design was destined to change. The following are excerpts from a letter I wrote describing the Creative Writing Forum as I saw it in February 1985:

The Forum will begin with each of Essex Community College's nine "feeder" high schools choosing its five best creative writers. The schools will then send copies of one work by each of the students to me, and I will divide the entries into five groups. Then, I will send each entrant a booklet containing his work and that of eight of his or her peers.

After the forty-five participants are selected, they will be asked to read and discuss (with a faculty advisor from each school) selected works by the author who is being featured in that year's Forum. In addition, they will be asked to review the pieces by their peers.

On a date to be determined, the students and the faculty advisors will be invited to Essex Community College. During the morning, the author whose works all of the students will have read will conduct a lecture/discussion of his or her works for the students' benefit. Then, during the afternoon, each of the five groups will meet with a creative writing instructor who will conduct a peer evaluation.

During the following day, the featured author will give a lecture to which English teachers from all of the county high schools and all three of the county community colleges will receive invitations. In addition, special guests, such as members of the Board, could be invited.

Three weeks after the students meet with the author and hear their efforts evaluated by their peers, they will resubmit their revised works. Then these works will be judged, and the top three will be selected. The authors of these pieces will be offered scholarships to Essex Community College.

Moreover, a group of readers, chosen from Essex Community College's own students and/or some of the winners of the High School Speech Tournament, will be asked to orally interpret the three winning works. Their readings will be taped for presentation on the college's cable station.

Finally, the selections of all forty-five winners will be printed in a booklet, and this booklet will be distributed to local libraries and will be available to schools throughout the county.

I have to admit that all of this still sounds pretty good to

me. But it's not what eventually happened. And here is where bad luck that turned out to be good took over.

The people who handle grant funding for Essex loved the idea, but they could find no one locally to finance it. They then suggested that I file grant applications with several agencies and wait. But waiting is generally not part of my nature, and besides, two years before I had waited for a "sure thing" grant to be accepted, only to have it turned down. So I acted this time as I eventually did in the previous case, and I sought alternative funding.

I knew that if I asked my college to pay for the event by itself, that we would not be able to afford a very prominent writer and that the Forum might occur once, but it most likely would never be repeated. After I considered that possibility, I made a change which ended up greatly improving my original concept.

There are three community colleges in Baltimore County, Maryland, and although the colleges have the same board, they are independent in all other ways. Despite that fact, I decided to approach the other two colleges with my proposal and the suggestion that we rotate the Forum from one college to the next for a trial period of three years. To my surprise, the other two schools, Catonsville and Dundalk Community Colleges, were very enthusiastic about the idea. But there was one missing piece, so I asked the English Office of the Baltimore County Public Schools to co-sponsor this project, and I received this office's full support. From that point on, the Creative Writing Forum became a

collaborative effort.

First, we set up a steering committee that included English department members from each community college and three high school teachers, plus one representative from the English office of Baltimore County. When the committee met, we determined to work in two directions to acquire funding. At the same time that we sought external funding, we went after institutional support of one thousand dollars per community college and five hundred dollars from the county schools. The latter method, with some modifications in the amount of support, is the one we have used to pay for the Forum for the last three years.

Once the issue of funding was settled, we talked about a featured writer for the first year of the Forum. After some preliminary work, we created a list of potential speakers. We wanted someone who could work well with students and who could give an excellent public reading, and we were fortunate enough to get William Stafford to agree to be the featured author at the first Creative Writing Forum.

Once these matters were taken care of, the steering committee began to review and revise my original plan. Because there are twenty-one high schools in Baltimore County, we decided to limit each school to one representative per one thousand students (thirty students for the whole county). These thirty representatives were to be chosen by means of a contest at each institution, and one of each student's works was to be entered in the contest for a community college scholarship. At this point,

several members of the steering committee realized that there was a problem with my scholarship idea, for there was a good chance that none of the contest winners might be interested in attending a community college. To solve this problem, we decided to create a list of those entrants who wanted to attend a community college. Then, we could pick the best of these entries, and that individual could be offered a scholarship that we knew would be used. The next idea from the committee added a whole new dimension to the project. We decided to have a series of workshops given by local creative writers to small groups of students. To accommodate this change, we determined to reconceive the two days of the event. The first day instead of the second was to be devoted to a public presentation by the featured author. To fill out this day, we also scheduled a dinner before the featured author's presentation. At this dinner, board members, administrators, and faculty from the community college and administrators and faculty from the public schools could get to meet the author and each other. Also, after the public reading, we scheduled a reception that was open to the public. Then the second day was devoted to the students and their advisors. It included peer review sessions (with a high school and a college creative writing teacher leading each group); workshops led by local creative writers; and a luncheon for the students, their advisors, the local writers, the peer group leaders, and the featured writer. At the end of the luncheon, the featured writer would talk about and then answer questions about the selected works that the students had read. Finally,

after the talk, the featured author would present each student with a signed volume that contained the works that had been discussed.

After planning these two days, the committee went on to look at the remainder of the Forum's schedule. After some discussion, the committee decided to maintain one part of my original plan and to change two other aspects of it. What stayed the same was the idea of allowing the students to revise their entries after they heard what their peers had to say about them during the peer review session. (The entrants were given two weeks to revise their entries if they chose to do so.) At the same time the steering committee removed two elements that the members thought would add even more expense and complications to an already expensive and complex event--having the winning selections presented on cable television and printing all of the entries in a special booklet.

The 1986-1987 Creative Writing Forum was almost everything that we had hoped it would be. William Stafford gave an excellent reading and worked very well with the students; his reading was well attended; and the students, faculty, and members of the community evaluated the event very positively.

However, based on the students' evaluations, our own assessment of the event, and William Stafford's reactions to the Forum, we made several changes before the second Forum. First, although the students loved the workshops with local writers, they were less impressed with the peer review sessions. Despite the fact that these sessions allowed them to hear the reactions

of students other than those who attended their schools, they felt that these reactions were little different from those that they already received in their creative writing classes. Instead of the peer reviews, they asked us to expand the workshops, and we decided to do so. Next, the members of the steering committee felt that the committee itself was too large to be effective and that the high school faculty members were being overwhelmed by the combination of classroom demands and committee tasks. Thus, the committee was cut back to two representatives per college and one representative from the Baltimore County Public Schools. Finally, we made a change based on a comment made by William Stafford in answer to a question posed by the faculty advisor of Essex's student newspaper. She asked him (rather facetiously), "How does it feel to be one of the prizes in a contest?" His eloquent answer went well beyond her question. He talked about how creative writers are too often taught to compete for prizes instead of competing with themselves. After the members of the steering committee thought about his response, we determined to deemphasize the contest elements of the Forum. Instead, we decided to let each high school select three juniors or seniors as representatives with the selection process to be based on who would benefit most from the program and not on a contest. Then, we allowed any student who was interested in competing for a community college scholarship to do so by submitting a brief portfolio of his or her works to us a few weeks before the Forum itself. Thus, we were able to select the scholarship winner before the Forum took place and to announce the winner the night

of the featured writer's reading.

For the second Creative Writing Forum, Linda Pastan was featured. Her reading was very well attended once again, the Baltimore Sun contained a feature article about her, and reactions to the event were as favorable as they were the year before.

In a few weeks, the third Creative Writing Forum, featuring Josephine Jacobsen, will take place. In planning this year's event, we discovered that we had finally gotten to the stage where only fine tuning was necessary. For instance, this year we decided to give each of the faculty advisors an autographed copy of one of Josephine Jacobsen's works in order to thank them for their help.

Plans are already under way for next year's program with the colleges and the public schools having already agreed to fix their contributions at a slightly higher level. It looks like the Creative Writing Forum is here to stay.

In conclusion, I would like you to ponder the following possibility. Perhaps, Fate and a combination of bad luck that turned out to be good brought you to this session instead of to one of the many other activities there were to choose from at this time on a Saturday afternoon in Seattle. Moreover, the Creative Writing Forum is an idea that works and one that can easily be changed to meet your institution's particular needs. (I have some materials up here that you can take with you after this session.) Now all you have to do is to revise this project a few times to make it your own.